

Miller-Southside Neighborhood Master Plan

CHAPTER 6: NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND OPEN SPACE, GREENWAYS, PARKS AND RECREATION

GOAL

To maintain and enhance the existing, cultivated natural setting of this neighborhood and to develop a broader palette and scale of park environments and landscape features.

BACKGROUND

Chief among the unique characteristics of this neighborhood is its cultivated natural beauty. The sidewalks and roadways are articulated and bound by grand scale canopies of trees. This intimate, space-defining attribute is what largely differentiates the Miller-Southside neighborhood from newer suburbs.

This long-established residential neighborhood is delimited by the public realms of Blacksburg, specifically the Virginia Tech campus and a collective of civic buildings: the public library, police station, and municipal building, Beeks Elementary School, Gables Shopping Center, and Main Street. Consequent to the neighborhood's urban proximity and controlled natural setting, the Miller-Southside neighborhood attracts significant pedestrian traffic.

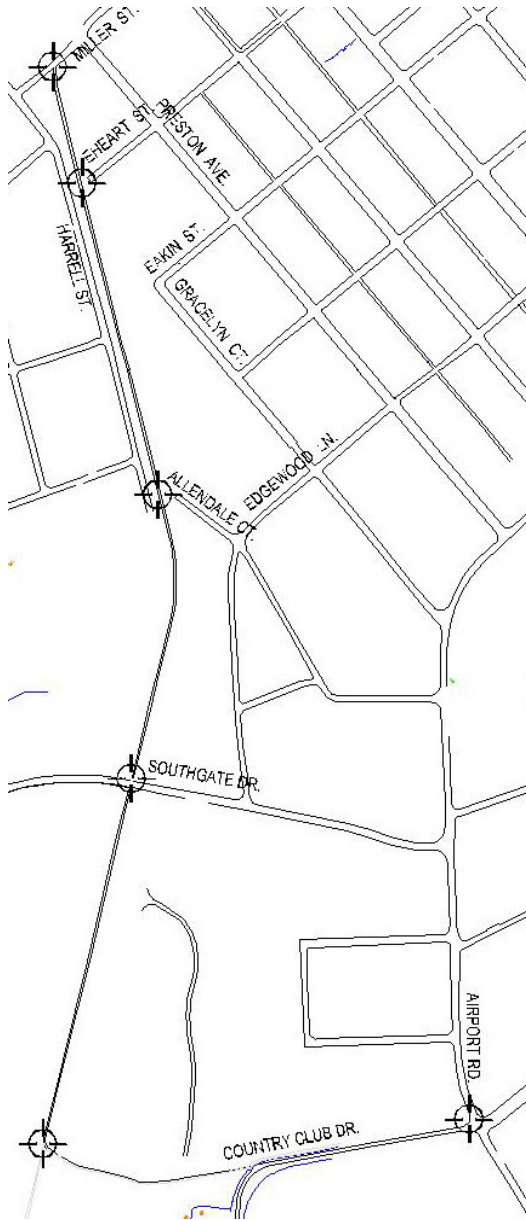
Further, the Huckleberry Trail that adjoins the neighborhood to the west draws walkers, runners, and bicyclists from across the town. There are five primary access nodes to the trail: 1.) Miller Street, 2.) Eheart Street, 3.) Allendale Court, 4.) Southgate Drive, and 5.) Country Club Drive. Aside from this greenway trail, there is no dedicated expanse of parkland in the Miller-Southside neighborhood or in its immediate vicinity.

OPPORTUNITIES

The proximity to the Huckleberry Trail encourages the establishment and development of intersecting Greenway trails and adjacent Parks. Multi-scaled, communal infrastructures could provide for small gatherings, free play, organized sport, open nature, individual contemplation, connecting pathways, and horticultural exhibition.

CHALLENGES

The auction in December 2003 of 31 acres along the western side of South Main Street presents ongoing dilemmas for the adjacent neighborhoods which support natural pedestrian-friendly environments and Blacksburg's growing infrastructure. While many residents support re-development of the existing dilapidated 13.2 commercial acres parallel to South Main Street, many were dismayed when an additional 26.6 acres were added to the proposed development scheme, comprising a 300% percent increase in proposed commercial development. Consequent to the December 2003 sale, the



The Huckleberry Trail and its primary access nodes.

developers petitioned for, and received, a zoning change to the Town's Comprehensive Plan despite general opposition from concerned residents. By April 2004 Town Council approved the sweeping change in the Town's Comp Plan which eliminated the 26.6 acre buffer strip between the commercial and residential zones by changing 11.8 acres zoned professional office and 14.8 acres zoned R-4 low-density housing to 26.6 acres commercial. This includes the "Eakin Farm," located between Gables Shopping Center and Beeks Elementary, which adjoins the southern-most edge of the Miller-Southside neighborhood and comprises a large tract of undeveloped green space. Currently, this green space is used recreationally as a rugby field, but continued recreational use is threatened by commercial encroachment sanctioned by the rezoning. The proposed grand-scale development on the engorged 39.8 acre commercial plot not only threatens the Miller-Southside neighborhood, but is also particularly dire for Airport Acres. Of concern by the abutting neighborhoods is traffic, loss of green space, loss of property value for immediately adjacent homes, undermining of the real downtown, dramatic increase in building scale and density, security of young school children, negative impact on existing woodland and wetlands, and loss of the natural dynamic sloping terrain. Further threat by encroachment is also indicated by the auction of December 2003. Sold to one owner were two large lots (801 and 803 Airport Road) totaling 6 acres adjacent to Margaret Beeks Elementary School and currently zoned R-4. The owners are said to be investigating a change in zoning of these properties. Commercial strip mall development, under any guise, is not desired by the Miller-Southside neighborhood.

Beeks Elementary School currently houses a playground, a “tot lot.”

The existing five intersecting nodes the neighborhood shares with the Huckleberry Trail have the potential to be distinctive places for the neighborhood and its visitors. Some of these sites are large enough to become mini-parks.

Existing vacant lots in the neighborhood could be developed into “pocket” parks to provide small-scale public green spaces or play areas.

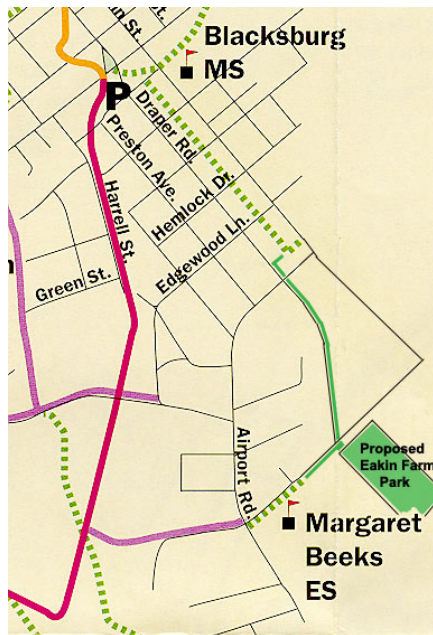
The extant, yet compromised, allées of trees establish an aesthetic precedent by which to encourage future tree planting and tree replacement with large-scale, slow growth trees along the street.

The refinement of our alleyways could provide not only a safe pedestrian experience, but another unique mode to traverse the neighborhood. This might entail keeping foliage trimmed, filling holes and smoothing ruts in the roadway, or articulating a designated path.

A possible inroad for commercial development in the neighborhood is posed by the land comprising the Beeks Elementary School which is owned by the Montgomery County School Board. The board has closed the former Blacksburg Middle School and there are no guarantees that the land comprising Beeks Elementary, approximately 20 acres, will always maintain its present, civic purpose. Should Beeks Elementary be closed in the future, commercial forces could further encroach from the Main Street business zone, cutting into the neighborhood. Zoning changes in adjacent properties make this possibility a more likely scenario.

Trees are challenging, as their ultimate demise is precipitated by a variety of factors, such as old age, catastrophic weather, the inexperienced homeowner, and even the pruning shears of the city. Ultimately, maintaining the integrity of the mature landscaping requires individual, voluntary compliance. Success is only likely through a very persistent educational campaign.

Maintaining and establishing large growth trees is compromised by above grade utility lines. The town’s current program promoting below-grade utility lines would allow for healthy growth of large scale trees and also make the neighborhood less susceptible to power outages due to storms.



Map identifying existing trails (solid lines), proposed trails (dashed lines) and a proposed Eakin Farm Park.

ACTION STRATEGIES

Town Action Strategies

- Acquire the Eakin Farm (Rugby Field) property and establish a Community Park. Indeed, the 2046 Blacksburg Comprehensive Master Plan proposes a park for this area. (Figure PR-14, page 111). Such a park could accommodate active recreational activities, such as soccer, baseball, tennis, ice skating, or perhaps swimming. In 1999 Blacksburg's only outdoor pool was closed and a new leisure pool for the town is in the planning stages. "Eakin Farm" not only provides a suitable location for such a Community Park, but would also offer a reasonable green buffer to the neighborhood from the strip development along South Main Street. Alternatively, the town could seek a conservation easement for this property.
- Create the "Eakin Farm Trail". Extend the proposed spur extension (Greenways map, July 2000) from the Huckleberry's Country Club node past its Airport Road termination to a new Draper Road termination point. Concurrently, continue the proposed trail running along the alleyway between South Main Street and Draper Road down the east side of Draper Road from Airport to Country Club. Develop the alleyway trail transition via a bend onto Draper Road in addition to that onto Main Street. These two trail extensions would intersect at the proposed Eakin Farm Park .
- Install a sidewalk along the eastern edge of Draper Road from Airport to Country Club. Concurrently, require the business at 1155 Draper Road, currently *Children's Nest Daycare*, to create a different vehicular entrance and exit to supplant the entrance and exit on to Draper Road, a neighborhood street. The designated land-use for this "business" site is R-4, low-density residential. A business oriented entrance and egress is easily accommodated via Faystone Street from Main or alternatively, via the McCoy Funeral/Plaza One parking lot off Country Club Road.

- Bury utility cables as upgrades become necessary.
- Replace industrial street lighting with more intimate residential-scaled lighting: lower to the ground, less lumens. Support this effort through the Neighborhood Enhancement Grant Program in conjunction with the Town Cost Share Program.
- Install sidewalks on both sides of Airport Road and on one side of Draper extension and Country Club Road. Perhaps utilizing the Neighborhood Enhancement Grant Program in conjunction with the Town Cost Share Program.
- Enhance the pedestrian experience, not only during the day, but also at night. Extend sidewalks to more streets throughout the neighborhood to create a network. Additionally, lower light levels can slow down cars making it safer to walk in the evening.

Neighborhood Action Strategies

- Use the Neighborhood Enhancement Grant Program to fund the design and landscaping of the five intersecting nodes the neighborhood shares with the Huckleberry Trail. The neighborhood could sponsor a design competition to address this.
- Investigate the feasibility of purchasing or acquiring use of extant, vacant lots throughout the neighborhood for development into community mini-parks and gardens. Approach owners of such property with proposals of “right of first refusal” or establishments of conservation easements.
- Perhaps the Miller-Southside Alliance could procure a standing dictum of “first right of refusal” for land sales.
- Work with Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee and the Director of Parks and Recreations to advance the creation of the Eakin Farm Community Park. Consequently, pursue the creation of a joint-use agreement with the Montgomery County School Board for the development of an Eakin Farm Community Park master plan that incorporates the adjoining Beeks Elementary School grounds. Minimally, work to prevent Main Street commercial development from “growing” into the neighborhood via the Eakin Farm property.
- Establish a tree-planting program. Inform and encourage tree planting and tree replacement with large, slow growth trees along the street to reinforce and promote the extant yet compromised allées of trees. Create a neighborhood group tree-planting day. Distribute a pamphlet, perhaps financed by the Miller-Southside Alliance, detailing the ecologic history of the neighborhood and promoting planting recommendations to help maintain our cultivated natural heritage.

- Replace industrial street lighting with more intimate lighting: closer to ground, less lumens. Pursue Neighborhood Grants for financial support.
- Bury utility cables as upgrades become necessary.
- Work to deter the “suburbanization” of the neighborhood. Discourage: excess, unnecessary signage; ornate, out-of-scale “fences;” large, formal expanses of manicured grass; super-sized renovations and additions.